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CIA/CPAS---NID-88-143JX---

National Intelligence Daily

Monday
20 June 1988



TCS 2543 88 1 P 604

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CPAS NID 88-143JX
TCS 2843/88
20 June 1988

23

~~Top Secret~~

(b)(3)

Contents

NR Record

Special Analyses

Mexico: Election Politics 11

NR Record

~~Top Secret~~
TCS 2843/88
20 June 1988

(b)(3)

~~Top Secret~~

(b)(3)

Special Analysis**MEXICO:****Election Politics**

Mexico's ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party is facing one of the toughest national elections in its 60-year history. The opposition on both the left and right is challenging the PRI's claim to represent the majority of Mexicans and its ability to control the vote. The party remains assured of winning the election—through manipulation if necessary—but probably will face charges of fraud and possible demonstrations in the postelection period.

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The election, scheduled for 6 July, comes at an unprecedented low point in the ruling party's popularity. More than six years of economic deterioration, coupled with recent austerity measures, have eroded the party's usual support, especially among organized labor. Abstention reached nearly 80 percent in some recent state elections. The PRI presidential candidate, Carlos Salinas, has been unable to inspire enthusiasm among voters and is unpopular because, as budget secretary, he initiated many austerity measures.

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The Opposition Challenge

Former ruling-party dissident Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, who leads the leftist opposition, has mounted a surprisingly strong presidential campaign. The son of Mexico's most revered postrevolutionary president, Cardenas has special appeal to peasants who benefited from his father's agrarian reform; [redacted] as many as 100,000 peasants who belong to the ruling party in Mexico State support Cardenas. His populist platform, which champions labor rights and calls for a debt moratorium, also attracts voters tired of continuing government calls for economic sacrifice.

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Cardenas got a significant boost recently when socialist candidate Heberto Castillo withdrew from the race. Castillo commanded only a limited number of votes, but his withdrawal has a significant symbolic impact in unifying most of the left. With one less presidential candidate, moreover, the ruling party will have more difficulty employing its usual strategy of dividing the opposition.

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The right wing also has mounted a strong challenge to the PRI. The candidate of the conservative National Action Party, Manuel Clouthier, is a charismatic businessman who has run an aggressive campaign, promoting civil disobedience. Cardenas's surging popularity and bickering among conservatives have nevertheless weakened Clouthier's bid.

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~~Top Secret~~TCS 2843/88
20 June 1988

~~Top Secret~~

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Ruling-Party Strategy

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Outlook

The ruling party is in little danger of losing the election [redacted]

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[redacted] Party leaders

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apparently recognize, however, that the prolonged economic crisis and the opposition's popularity make the usual overwhelming PRI victory unacceptable, and they have publicly indicated they will settle for what they consider a modest majority of about 60 percent. [redacted]

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Events immediately after the election probably will pose a more difficult challenge for the PRI. Supporters of both Cardenas and Clouthier anticipate electoral fraud and plan mass demonstrations and civil disobedience; Cardenas's supporters numbered 100,000 at a rally in Mexico City this spring. A successful, coordinated protest campaign will further damage the party's reputation at home and abroad and could spark violent confrontations with the authorities.

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TCS 2843/88
20 June 1988